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[Print Page](#)**Tuesday, April 17, 2007**

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## National Guard to begin reducing border force

By: MARK WALKER - Staff Writer

SAN YSIDRO -- As planning begins to reduce the number of National Guard troops along the border with Mexico, less than 1,000 of 6,000 new U.S. Border Patrol agents that the Bush administration wants in place by the end of next year have been hired.



*While others sleep, Jesus Gonzalez, who says he's homeless, sits in a storm drain on the U.S. side of the international border between Tijuana, Mexico and San Diego, California on Wednesday. The border fence goes over the open area of the drainage where a man stands in the background. Gonzalez said that he and several other homeless people live in this tunnel and sometimes he tries to go further into the United States. He also said they go back through the tunnel to Tijuana to get food and supplies.*

**HAYNE PALMOUR IV** Staff Photographer

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As of March 17, the Border Patrol has only been able to hire and train 593 new agents or 9 percent of the administration's goal, according to Javier Rios, a Border Patrol spokesman in Washington.

Screening new agents and a lengthy training process have resulted in the relatively small number of new hires. By the end of 2008, the administration wants a Border Patrol force of about 18,000 agents, up from the 12,000 in place when the president ordered the troops to the border last June.

Guard commanders in California and other states assigned to the border duty are starting to put together plans to reduce the troop presence.

There were 1,389 members of the California Guard's air and ground units on the border last week, a number that probably will fall to between 1,000 and 1,100 by the fall, said Lt. Col. Jon Siepmann, a Guard spokesman in Sacramento.

"This has always been a temporary mission," he said, adding that the assignment officially ends in December 2008. "Our end strength (later this year) will be based on what the Border Patrol says it needs."

Governors across the nation, including Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, initially resisted the Guard assignment, saying it came at a time when Guard units and their families were stressed by frequent deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan.

As the border mission has gone on, those assignments haven't waned, and the Defense Department last week said that up to 12,000 Guard troops from four states other than California could be headed to Iraq early in 2008.

The border assignment has been a success, according to the administration and the Border Patrol, which say the number of people trying to enter the U.S. illegally has fallen dramatically.

Along the 60-mile San Diego border sector, apprehensions fell by more than 6,500 people in a 12-month period ending April 1 with 67,926 arrests compared with 74,463 in the previous 12-month period, according to Border Patrol statistics.

**Cat and mouse**

Attempted illegal crossings into the U.S. are still a daily part of life along the border.

As an example: A few yards from where a California National Guard crew last week bulldozed a hillside just over the line that separates Tijuana from the U.S., a half-dozen homeless people were gathered in a drainage spillway, seemingly oblivious to the noise and work going on around them.

The group was actually several feet inside the U.S., living in a makeshift encampment. A member of the group who identified himself as Jesus Gonzales said he had been there for several weeks, weighing whether to try to make his way farther into San Diego County.

The Border Patrol says that kind of cat-and-mouse game is a regular occurrence near the San Ysidro crossing on Interstate 5, the nation's busiest land crossing.

"There are always people who will play that game," James Jacques, a supervisory Border Patrol agent in San Diego, said of the group. "It becomes a question of how much time and resource do you want to spend running back and forth chasing people who can move a few feet and be back in Mexico?"

It was another example of the oddities encountered along the border, where Guard troops have been serving as extra eyes and ears, as well as on construction and support crews.

Instead of trying to arrest the homeless group, the Border Patrol relies on cameras, sensors and spotters to make sure the squatters stay put.

Working as members of what the Guard calls "entry identification teams" is one of the primary jobs for the Guard along the 1,983-mile border with Mexico. Only a very few carry arms under guidelines that the administration established.

The spotting task goes on day and night at places in this region that the Border Patrol has given nicknames such as Tin Can, Arnie's Point, Washer Woman and Smuggler's Gulch, the latter a large, rugged expanse where attempted crossings are commonplace.

### **Guard drawdown**

As the patrol struggles to find and qualify recruits to send to its academy in Artesia, N.M., Guard officials are beginning work on identifying who in its ranks to pull off the border mission, dubbed by the Bush administration as Operation Jump Start.

Just how many troops will remain by year's end and by this time next year is uncertain, the Guard's Liepmann said.

California's border is divided into two primary enforcement sectors, San Diego, where 455 Guard troops were assigned last week, and El Centro.

The far eastern portion of the state is covered by Border Patrol agents based in Yuma, where Bush appeared last Monday to push his immigration reform legislation and praise the Guard for its efforts.

"Fewer are trying to come across; we're deterring people from attempting illegal border crossings in the first place," Bush said.

Capt. Kim Holman, a public affairs officer assigned to the San Diego sector, said the Guard troops are using the border assignment as a "real world" training opportunity.

"We think we have done a lot to improve the situation," she said last week. "We're very proud of the reduction in apprehensions because we think that shows our help is working."

Agents and their Guard assistants assigned to the San Diego sector work out of six stations along the border and from two inland sites, covering 7,000 square miles overall.

The sector is anticipating getting at least 22 more agents soon from the pool of the newly hired, said agent Adan Cortez, who was working the San Ysidro area last week along with several Guard troops.

Cortez said he believes the Guard's presence has helped reduce attempted illegal crossings because smugglers and people acting on their own know the border is being much more closely monitored.

Besides acting as spotters, Guard troops have filled desk jobs and are helping to build a secondary fence to augment an existing paneled barricade that is easily scaled. The California Guard also has a fleet of eight helicopters based at San Diego's North Island Naval Air Station that are used to conduct patrols and ferry agents in and out of remote areas.

Chris Bauder, president of the Border Patrol union that represents the approximately 1,650 agents that make up the rank and file of San Diego sector, said the National Guard has helped. But the union official said the various attempts to curb illegal immigration over the years haven't succeeded.

"There's no question that there are more resources down on the border, but from our perspective, U.S. border strategies remain a failure," he said.

### **'Helping out'**

Back where the homeless Mexicans were making camp last week, Guard engineering crews are working to reduce the slope of an area where the secondary fence is under construction.

It's the same kind of work that Guard troops have been helping with in this region since the Clinton administration launched a program called Operation Gatekeeper in 1995. Guard troops also have aided in drug interdiction efforts for years.

All of the California National Guard troops working on the Bush border initiative volunteered for the task, including Sgt. Nick Diaz, a medic from Los Angeles who spent most of 2005 as an Army ambulance driver in Tikrit, Iraq.

Diaz has been on the border assignment for the last nine months but has yet to have been called on to treat anyone. It's boring compared with his experiences in Iraq, he said.

"But I also know that we're helping out down here," he said, adding that he can go home and see his family when not on duty.

If guardsmen spot an attempted border crossing or some other illegal activity, they report it and the Border Patrol dispatches its agents to make the arrest.

"Our mission is not to stop or apprehend illegal aliens," said Guard Master Sgt. Michael Drake. "It's to help the Border Patrol stop the number of attempted entries, reduce the flow of drugs and erect new barriers."

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